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## Introduction to Historical Methods

A talk by lab historian Alan Carr, intended for an instructional writing seminar. The talk covers methods for historical research and writing.

LOS ALAMOS  
PROJECT  
MAIN GATE  
PASSES MUST BE  
PRESENTED TO  
GUARDS

# NATIONAL SECURITY RESEARCH CENTER





# INTRODUCTION TO HISTORICAL METHODS

*It's More Fun Than You Think!*



**Alan B. Carr**

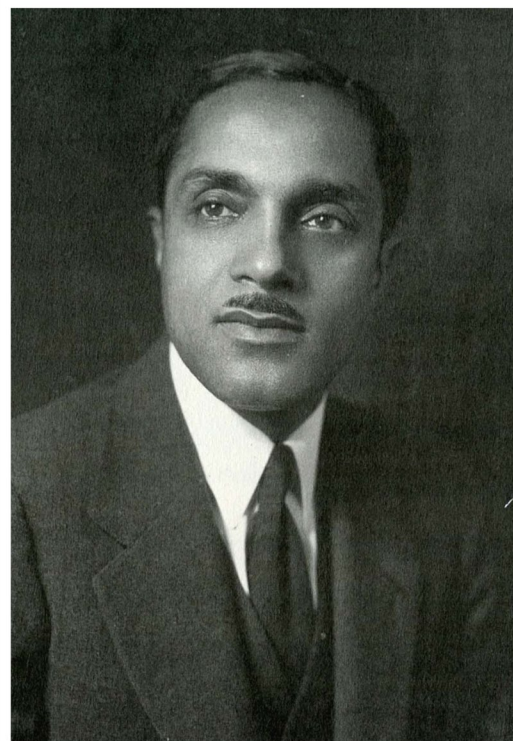
NSRC Senior Historian  
Program Manager





MEN AND  
WOMEN  
SPECIALLY  
TRAINED IN  
HISTORICAL  
WORK ARE  
MORE VALUABLE  
TO SCHOOLS  
THAN SHELF  
AFTER SHELF OF  
A HISTORICAL  
REFERENCE  
LIBRARY.

(This applies to scientific laboratories as well!!)



Dr. Charles H. Wesley

# "HISTORY'S A DONE DEAL."

-Rogerus



- Who was your high school history teacher? What did you think??
- Why study history anyway?
- What's better: a competent researcher who can't write or an incompetent researcher who writes very well?
- What "stuff" do you choose to "parrot" back? What "stuff" do you choose to omit? Why??
- Do you recognize your own biases?
- Do you actively seek and competently blend multiple perspectives?
- Do you try to prove what you already believe or do you try to learn?
- A good historian is mindful of all this!

"I have a great reservation about these studies where somebody goes out and interviews a bunch of people and reads a lot of stuff and writes a book and puts it on a shelf and nobody ever reads it."

**Dr. Vannevar Bush**

Head of the U.S. Office of Scientific Research and Development



"One of the advantages of teaching history is that you don't have to create anything, you know. You just have to remember stuff that happened and then parrot it back."

**Dr. Sheldon Cooper**

Fictional Caltech Theoretical Physicist





# WHO PAYS MOST HISTORIANS?



Could something like  
this happen today?

Nah!!





# “SHE READ MY MIND... *AND SLAPPED MY FACE.*”

-Bob Wills

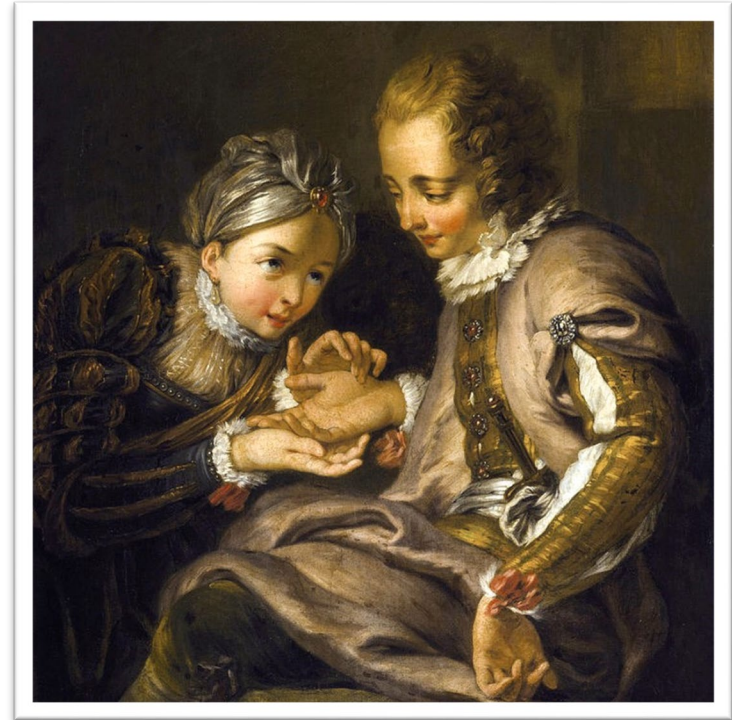


- Primacy: “Of two sequential events the second one tends to be retained less well.”
- Or: *That which is learned first is learned best* (e.g., do you remember your first...?)
- How can this affect your judgement?
- The Barnum Effect: *You’re special!* “NOT!”
- The challenge is to maintain an open mind while being appropriately skeptical!
- As you write, pretend your biggest critic is looking over your shoulder
- Remember: history professors don’t educate the masses, forwarded emails do!



*Whatever you do in life, surround yourself with smart people who'll argue with you.*

- Coach John Wooden



*You are a very kind and considerate person, but when somebody does something to break your trust, you feel deep-seated anger.*

— A politician who really understands you

# “EVERY SOURCE IS GOOD, AND EVERY SOURCE IS BAD.”

-Kenny Rogers

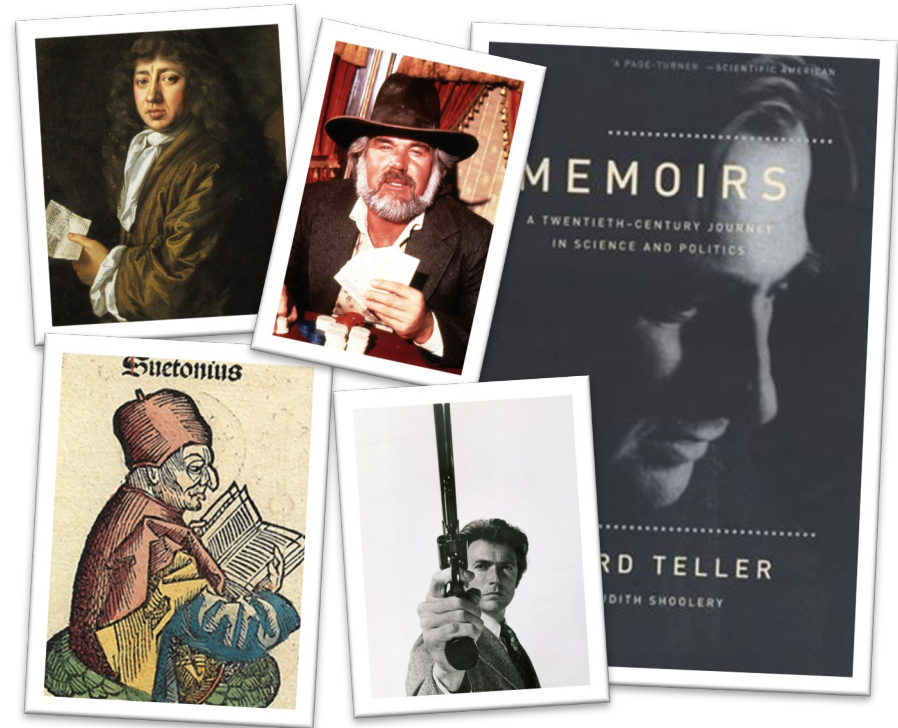


- How much history is actually recorded in the first place? Very, very little!
- How do you know what you don't know??
- Too little is recorded pertaining to the ancient past; perhaps too much is recorded today!
- What perspectives are missing? Why?
- If you really want to understand individuals and societies, seek to understand value systems
- A skilled historian can extract useful information from almost any source!

*Trust me, I'm a scientist!*

– A “scientist” you should **not** trust

*One can be entirely lucid, entirely honest and entirely wrong.* – John C. Hopkins



*A man's got to know his limitations.*

– “Dirty” Harry Callahan

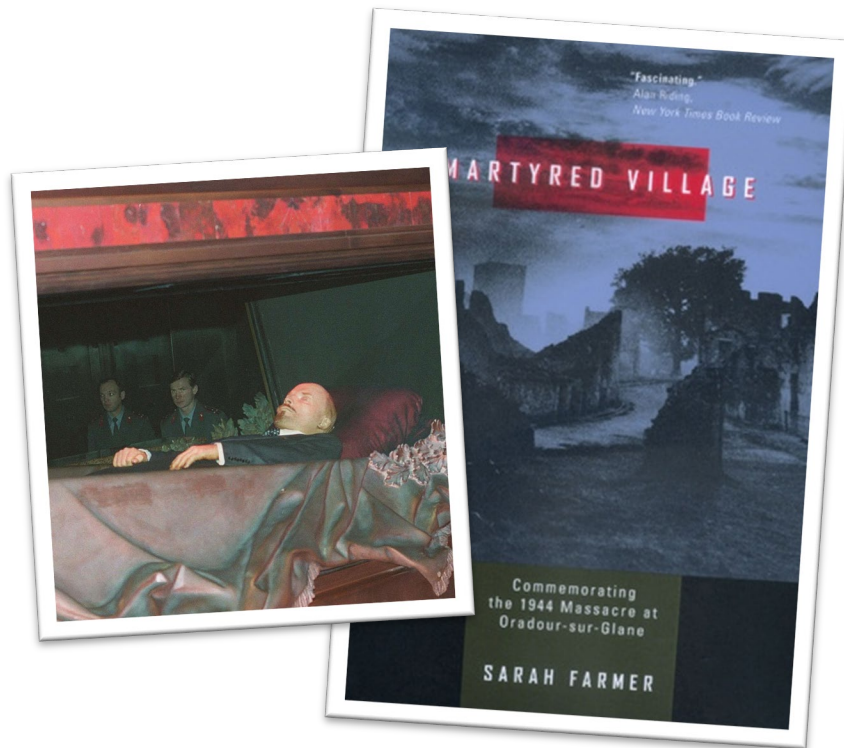
# CAN YOU REALLY PRESERVE HISTORY?



- Historians cannot recreate the past
- What roles can historical objects and historical places play in storytelling?
- Human memory itself can be considered a malleable, perishable artifact
- Even the most carefully preserved artifact changes: it slowly decomposes as it loses contact with context
- What are the *benefits* of forgetting the past? What are the dangers?
- Sometimes remembering can have an unsettling effect: be prepared

*It is, then, the spirit, enthusiasm, and interest which revive the dead matter in lecture-courses, and they in turn live longer than the facts.*

*- Charles H. Wesley*



*Comrades, trust me: there are far worse things to try and preserve than documents.*

*– Vladimir Lenin*





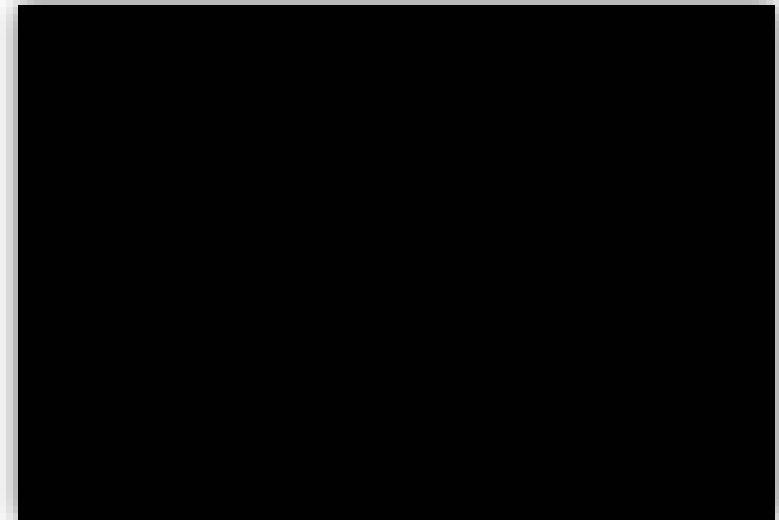
- Do only the victors write history? Are those who fail to learn history truly doomed to repeat it?
- Can history help us avoid trite clichés about history in the future?
- Bigger engines mean faster cars, right??
- Be very cautious in drawing ‘lessons’ from history: typically, only very generic ‘lessons’ can be gathered with confidence
- Don’t be afraid to use lots and lots of qualifiers, even if it means frustrating your manager and/or the security folks!

*No changes are permanent, but change is.*

– Lee, Lifeson and Peart

*America is all about speed.  
Hot, nasty, bad-ass speed.*

– Eleanor Roosevelt



*The past is infinitely various, an inexhaustible storehouse of events from which we can prove anything or its contrary.*

- Sir Michael Howard





# DON'T PLAGIARIZE!



*Plagiarizers will be shot!  
Survivors will be shot again!*

- Confucius

- So, you've cited your source? You think you did a good job??

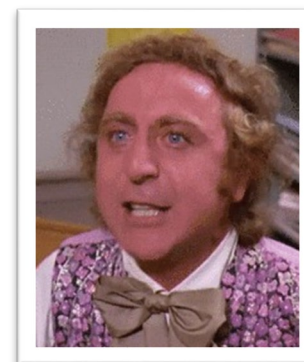
*It doesn't matter what you think!* - The Rock

- Did you *borrow* key words?
- Did you *borrow* phrases?
- Did you *borrow* key ideas?
- Did you *borrow* sentence structures?



*You get nothing!  
You lose! And you  
suck at life! I fart  
in your general  
direction, sir!*

- Willy Wonka



- Don't be lazy, be CREATIVE!!!

# LEARN TO PAINT WONDERFUL IMPRESSIONS!



- What will your audience remember in an hour? A day?? A year???

Customer: Alan, can you do the history of the Laboratory for us?  
Alan: Sure, how much time can you give me?  
Customer: Can you do it in 10 minutes?  
Alan: Well, not very well. Can you give me 75 minutes?  
Customer: We really need to get this done in 10 minutes.  
Alan: I'll see what I can do.

Epilogue: 17 minutes on the Manhattan Project, 87 seconds on the rest

- Does the study of history tell us more about the future, or more about ourselves?
- History can occasionally warn, often inspire and always enrich!
- ...or it can quickly bore your audience and be ignored: it's your choice!
- In writing history, it is your responsibility to properly synthesize a story!



You don't need to include all the fine details to make something beautiful!



*If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten.*

- Rudyard Kipling





SOME OF YOU HAVE HEARD ME SAY, “NEVER TRUST A HISTORIAN!” HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHAT WOULD PROMPT ME TO SAY SUCH A THING? CONSIDER THIS:

*There are countries in the world where it is precisely the duty of the historians to abolish the past, and their own professional survival depends on their success in keeping it abolished and erecting in its place a socially convenient myth which it is their function to defend, embellish, and generally keep up to date.*

Sir Michael Howard

